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PUBLIC HEALTH

AND THE

LAND QUESTION

~~CONSIDERED FROM THE STANDPOINT OF THE
SINGLE TAX.~~

—: BY :—
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Reprint from THE WEEKLY MEDICAL REVIEW, November 8, 1890



St-Louis,

XXII,

PUBLIC HEALTH AND THE LAND QUESTION.

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Read at a Meeting of the St. Louis Medico-Chirurgical Soc ety,
June 10, 1890.

There are probably many people who would deny that any taxing system, or plan for raising public revenues, could influence, or have any near or real connection with the public health; but I shall try to show in what follows that this is but a superficial and deceptive view to take of the matter, and that the health interest of populations is affected directly, positively, injuriously, by present wrongs and unnatural conditions that have their strength and support in existing laws relating to land.

It would, indeed, appear to be true that every great social question that cries for an answer, whether of health, safety, or morals, springs from the soil and is rooted in the earth—that fruitful source of all the constituents of the human body, and of the products needful for its full and perfect work.

Said the Indian chieftain, “The sun is my father, the earth is my mother; I will repose on her bosom.” The primitive idea of aboriginal man regarded the earth as a nourishing common mother whose ample bosom was the sufficient source of all good things needed by mankind, in which possession all had an equal share and right, and which could not be alienated or wrongfully invaded by another.

This early idea of nourishment and repose is further illustrated by the story of the fabled Antæus, son of



sea and earth, who when felled in conflict at once received new strength each time he was laid prostrate and rose to fight again with freshened vigor. An early legend of the Norsemen carries the same idea, the slain rising whole at daybreak, after a night's healing contact with the earth, to wage anew the endless battle.

But the natural laws concerning land, based on instinctive right and justice among primitive peoples, have been deliberately violated and selfishly perverted by civilized man, and out of a corrupted land policy is begotten a train of ills that will not be cured until a return to first principles is had, and the people of to-day learn the lesson to do justice one to another.

The swarming populations that crowd industrial centers are denied their natural right to comfortable and wholesome conditions of bodily living; through selfish greed and sinister avarice their birthright to liferoom and vital comfort is abridged, and their lives to all intents escheated into hands, living or dead, that hold the land in their clutches and forbid under the pains of trespass the use of that element which nature has so abundantly provided for all.

As man is a land animal—all his prime physical wants centering in the earth—a privation of his right to the use of land prejudices his health, for with land goes fresh air, sunlight and other wholesome bounties of nature; but where the bar to unused land prevails and a considerable population gathers, the result of necessity is to crowd them closer and closer together, to hinder their freedom of movement from place to place, and make them the dependents of him who is able to control the surface of the earth on which they are permitted to move and breathe.

The man who exercises this control is the landlord, and the circumstances of wage workers, and the conditions of industrial life generally have, in many instances, been so warped to the interests of employer or landlord that from a public health standpoint the industrial slavery of to-day is a vastly wider and graver question than any that arose in this country as a result

of human chattel slavery in the South a generation or more ago.

No habitual conditions of overcrowding that sapped vigor and destroyed life presented themselves in those days; the pecuniary interest of the slave lord forbade the destruction by preventable diseases of the industrially potent, or merchantable man, woman or child.

But, viewing the sanitary situation as it commonly presents itself to-day, what care for health has the man-lord, or landlord (the terms are nearly synonymous), after the wage is paid or rent received? What responsibility for his wholesome keeping follows the chattel of to-day to his home, if such it may be called?

Through stress of competition for work, or through adroit control of the labor market, the employer becomes in fact a man-lord, owning the labor of those in his employ, and having the positive advantage over the slave-holder of no pocket loss in case of sickness or death from disease among his workmen. He shrewdly applies a certain principle of taxation to human flesh, although he might be distressed at the thought of the application of the same principle to land.

The necessities of a family looking to him for bread, or the difficulty of getting employment elsewhere, or other causes, may serve to bind the workman to the service of his employer with the strength of iron bands, and at a price practically fixed by the latter, especially if it be in lines of unskilled labor, or employments requiring little skill, wherein the competition for work is always greatest.

Out of this condition of serfdom at its worst under present laws escape is nearly hopeless, and to it is added thralldom to the landlord for the privilege of precarious roof and shelter.

Of necessity the housing afforded by coercive wages is of the poorest and cheapest kind; and with more mouths to feed the more squalid the surroundings, and the more desperate in a social and sanitary sense the situation becomes.

The sole recourse usually is to the tenement where,

heaped floor above floor, in a tainted atmosphere, or in low fetid hovels, amidst poverty, hunger and dirt, in foulness, want and crime, crowded humanity suffers, and sickens, and perishes; for the landlord here is also the air-lord, the lord of sunlight, lord of all the primary conditions of life and living; and these are doled out for a price, failing which the wretched tenant is turned out to seek a habitation still more miserable.

Such in brief is the genesis and growth of municipal slums, those hotbeds of disease and social jungles, in whose miasms infections have their home; where in darkness, damp and dirt, lurk and breed and prosper the trinity of major plagues that most distress and destroy our kind—tuberculosis in all its forms, diphtheria and scarlet fever.

It has been said that ignorance begets filth, and filth begets disease, and disease begets sin, and sin begets crime; but how, under the conditions sketched, is this dread sequence to be avoided? What instruction in the necessity of care and cleanliness for the avoidance of disease can be addressed to despairing parents or half-famished children—famishing for want of everything wholesome? Must not the remedy reach farther back and strike deeper than that? Must it not cut to the root of the false and dangerous social, economical and industrial system out of which such evils arise?

With multiplying populations these grievous conditions tend to become more nearly universal throughout the laboring world, through the play of forces now at work, than was ever possible in the time of black slavery.

The centers and localities into which so large a proportion of the laboring population is crowded through force of present laws are in every city the dread and despair of sanitarians. There the most feared and fatal domestic scourges are active, and tend continually to spread with epidemic energy. The labor of sanitary officials in dealing with the problems and conditions there presented is not unlike the despairing toil of the nearly exhausted crew of a leaking ship in mid-ocean to

keep it afloat by bailing and pumping. Their best efforts in either case are merely palliative; they do not reach the seat of the trouble.

The sickness and death rates among tenement house populations are excessive, and especially so among young lives. Even in this city, which should be, and doubtless is, one of the healthiest of its size to be found anywhere, the deaths last year of children under five years of age amounted to nearly forty per cent of the total mortality, more than 2,000 dying under one year of age, and in many cities a relatively much higher proportion obtains.

An Episcopal bishop in New York,¹ in an address published during the present year, outlines certain conditions as follows:

"A civilization . . . which overtasks or underpays wage workers in order to add superfluous affluence and irresponsible power to the estates of a few; which helps a hundredth part of the population to own half of the property; which exposes innumerable women to moral ruin for a living; which drives pale and emaciated and rickety children daily from pestilential tenements to factories and mines; which countenances . . . an owner of real estate who has pocketed \$4,000,000 by the rental of four nests of misery and dens of vice, five stories high; which lets 15,000 children die within a year after they were born in these cellars and garrets, without uttering a sound of indignation or alarm; which robs the citizen . . . of his independence and manliness . . . enslaving him by fear or want to a landlord or employer; which increases the rate of suicide and insanity every year; . . . where in most industries 'one man is master and many serve,' " etc.: This, truly, is not a civilization for any conscientious, thinking man to be proud of.

A high birth rate prevails in these crowded and oppressed populations, the aim of nature appearing to be to meet the enormous life waste and margin against extinction; but of the vital or moral quality of offspring thus produced but little can be said, and as little reasonably expected. Tenement districts are known to

¹Bishop F. D. Huntington.

police officials as nurseries of crime, as they are known to sanitary authorities as breeding places of disease. Large numbers perish early, and of those who struggle through to adult life many are stunted and crippled and deformed in body or mind, or both, and usually, sooner or later, become inmates of hospitals, reformatories, poor houses, or prisons.

The march of cholera around the world, an outbreak of Oriental plague in Russian dominions, a flurry of smallpox here and there, the spread of yellow fever from its Cuban cradle, the classic terrors of leprosy, all arouse public interest, fix attention, and cause for a time a degree of alarm and spasmodic activity in the way of arrest and prevention; but as factors of human disability and death their influence is almost insignificant when compared with the eternal gnawing at population bone and sinew by diseases that are domesticated in all civilized lands mainly through the existence of conditions contraband alike of the common health, the common safety, common justice and common humanity.

Among the squalid habitations of the poor these diseases "walk in darkness and waste at noonday;" but what escape from them has the poor man with his family chained by iron necessity to his wretched surroundings? Said Harold, the Saxon, to the Norse invader in words of notable defiance: "He has said what he will grant King Harold Sigurdarsson; it is a space of seven feet, and it is so long because he is taller than most other men." Thus to a foe who was wasting the land, but less consideration than this even does modern society grant the toiling man—him who creates wealth by the application of his labor to the earth or its products, and upon whom, by the best authority, the only true prosperity of a country depends. He may see as he passes to and from his daily toil plenty of land that no man is using, but what is that to him? Living, he can hold only what his foot may cover, and dead, he finds scant elbow room in Potter's field.

In a public health sense, however, and in retribution to society, there is this remaining, that often rich and

poor fall before the same diseases, an "even-handed justice commands the ingredients of our poisoned chalice to our own lips," and sometimes ordains that the returning weapon shall slay him by whose hand it was projected.

"The eternal laws of justice bind
Oppressor and oppressed;
And, close as sin and suffering joined,
They march to fate abreast."

A dense and stifled population feels the first strokes and bears the brunt of pestilence developed by and springing from over-crowding, poverty and filth; and under such circumstances it is an almost impossible task on the part of public health officials to isolate and keep separated the sick and the well in order to check its progress. Even if the people worked heartily with the officials, and they seldom do, in their efforts to control and stamp out the epidemic flame, the paths which infection travels are so many, crooked and hidden, contact and intercourse, direct and indirect, between all classes and communities are so close, that though the house of wealth be ringed with fire still, sooner or later, contagion may come, and often with more swift and fatal effect than to the poor, who, by habit and usage, have, perhaps, gained a degree of tolerance of population poisons.

It is well that breaches of natural laws bring their own punishment, be it slow or swift, as the case may be; that the superstition which would lean on miraculous power to stay the march of disease finds scant support to day; that water will wet and fire will burn those who fall into them; that faith can stop neither bullets nor bacteria; that if we continually grow and sow the seeds of disease and death, we shall just as surely reap the appointed harvest, for in no other way, perhaps, can the blind and selfish greed of man be taught the exceeding gain of justice and fairness, the profit of right doing to all.

If by a readjustment of our laws we can put away

this social and sanitary reproach, and shatter the evil forces that crowd human beings into pestilent habitations and conditions that not only sap their health and cut short their lives, but are a perpetual menace and danger of the same sort to all in the community, and to other communities and peoples, the problem of population hygiene would become vastly more simple, and a great step be taken toward the final up-rooting of the maladies that now waste, weaken and destroy mankind.

The increasing tendency of wealth is away from the hands of the toiling many who produce it into the hands of the few, who, by favor of discriminating laws and the material power such favor brings, are enabled to hold and monopolize large areas of land and shut out from them whom they will; and this monopoly of a natural bounty necessary to life, repugnant alike to fundamental right and justice, operates more and more continually to produce massing of population, with all the evils to body and mind that spring from human overcrowding.

And herein is the bearing of the land question on the public health question; for, given as true the forces that mass populations within limits too narrow for health or safety, then the primary remedy would be to release the land from the grip of those who hold but will not use it, and deny to them or any man or combination of men the right to exact tribute from other men for the privilege of living—which right of tribute and control enables the landlord to reap usurious gain out of the necessities, the sufferings, and the lives of his fellow creatures.

As has recently been well said, "The difference between the ownership of a man and the ownership of that element on and from which he must live, if he is to live at all, is one of degree and not of kind. . . . If we . . . look at things as they are, we shall see that necessity is an effective whip-lash, poverty a heavy ball and chain, and want a blood-hound which no water can throw off the scent."

Who in present times has ever heard of a public mad-

house or prison, poorhouse or hospital being abolished because there was no further need for them? They are never abandoned until larger and still larger structures are provided which still shortly fail to meet the ever-increasing demand. This demand has grown within the present generation beyond all proper ratio to increase of population, and shows that there is a sinister, cankering, insidious cause operating at the very foundation of the social order producing the many-millioned man on the one hand, and multitudinous sick, insane, paupers and criminals on the other.

While the creation of wealth has in modern times been vastly quickened, its distribution has been grossly unequal; the few have been favored to the cost of the many, and through wealth thus gained and the power it gives, the few have acquired control of a vast proportion of the desirable land and can dictate the terms on which their fellow men may use it; and it is mainly by and through the exercise of this unjust power, the power to gain and hold landlord dominion over the surface of the earth, that such deep sanitary and social wrongs to the many are brought about—wrongs which charity and philanthropy can never cure, but which justice and fairness between man and man would in time eradicate through laws directed to the cause of the disease, and not to its results.*

Just as the whole field of medicine has been lightened and its practice simplified by discoveries in microscopic life, so has the domain of sanitary and social and political economy been illuminated and their several relations made clear by a better and growing understanding of the true position mankind should hold toward the land.

If he who holds the land holds equally power over the health, fortunes and lives of his fellow men through his present right to permit or deny them access to it for their use and support, then the change needed in our laws is to abolish private ownership in land, on the principle that no man can own as property that which is the natural heritage of all men, which no man or men did

anything to produce, which was here when man came and doubtless will be here when he is gone—and simply to let each individual take that amount of land which he can use, paying for such right of use into the public funds a sum proportioned to the advantages or opportunities it offers.

This course would abolish landlordism—for the public would receive the rental instead of private individuals, and this rental, as has been carefully estimated and demonstrated, would suffice for all necessary public expenditures of municipalities or states—free labor and the products of labor from oppression and taxation, direct and indirect, shut out from its use no man who desires land, further the public health by a wholesome dispersal of population into separate dwellings, abolish municipal slums and human rookeries, and deal to our commonest and deadliest pandemic infections a crushing blow in the very sources and seat of their power.

The complete freedom of man anywhere is impossible until the land is freed from the possibility of monopoly; and as population health chiefly depends on man's freedom of access to his birthright, that he may enjoy its wholesome advantages and avoid the contact of spreading diseases, land free from landlord domination is an indispensable condition of public health, as the question presents itself in connection with considerable bodies of people. In the up-rooting and destruction of the vested wrongs to the millions accruing by reason of the present land policy, lie the promise and potency of the realization and confirmation of one of the most sacred rights of man, now through ignorance, selfishness and avarice subverted and ignored, the right of those born into the world to health and comfort and allotted length of years.

